

TWO RECORDS OF MALE SOUTHERN ELEPHANT SEALS (*MIROUNGA LEONINA*) ON THE ATLANTIC COAST OF URUGUAY¹

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Two sightings of southern elephant seals (*Mirounga leonina*) at two different localities on the Atlantic coast of Uruguay are reported. Both specimens were completely moulted subadult males and did not bear any marks or tags. The first sighting occurred on 3 February 2003, ~100m from the 'Punta José Ignacio' lighthouse (34°50'S, 54°37'W), José Ignacio, Department of Maldonado. The specimen was resting on a sandy beach (ca. 150m in length) and was observed at a distance of ~10m (Figure 1a). It did not present any sign of injury and was apparently in good health conditions. About half an hour later, the animal moved slowly towards the shoreline and finally entered the sea.

The second sighting occurred around midday on 10 February 2005, ~500m in a straight line from the 'Cabo

Santa María' lighthouse (34°40'S, 54°09'W), at Bahía Chica beach, in the small town of La Paloma, Department of Rocha. This animal moved farther inland, reaching a street where it rested for nearly an hour, obstructing the traffic (Figure 1b, c). It presented two visible scars and it was not in a robust condition. Sometime later, the animal moved directly towards the beach. Just before entering the water, it stopped and again lay down for a short time during which it began to make flipping motions backwards and upwards with the fore flippers, throwing seaweeds and sand onto its back (Figure 1d). This 'sand throwing' behaviour appears to be common when the humidity of the environment is low, such as on hot, sunny days, and it may be a practical response to physical irritation or a displacement activity resulting from emotional conflict (Laws, 1956).



Figure 1. Views of two subadult male southern elephant seals recorded in Uruguay. (a) Animal resting on the beach close to the 'Punta José Ignacio' lighthouse, José Ignacio, Department of Maldonado, on 3 February 2003. (b-d) Different sequences of a hauled-out animal photographed on a street and on the Bahía Chica beach at La Paloma, Department of Rocha, on 10 February 2005. Two scars are visible in this specimen, one extending along the upper part of the right flank just behind the level of the fore flippers and the second one on the last third of the dorsum.

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The estimated total length of these two animals from the nose to the tip of the hind flippers ranged approximately from 4 to 4.5m. Their respective ages would be in the 6-7 and 7-8 year old groups, based on comparison with pictures and measurements taken from male elephant seals of known age from Isla 25 de Mayo/King George Island, South Shetland Islands, where a long term mark/resight program is being carried out since 1995 (Carlini *et al.* 2004). As regards to the possible origin of the two individuals here reported, Lewis *et al.* (2006) stated that the most common dispersion records of *M. leonina* around South America involved sexually mature males, which comprised 67% of 155 individuals categorized and sexed. Furthermore, they concluded that of the five breeding colonies closest to southern South America (Península Valdés, Malvinas/Falklands, South Georgia, Gough and Tristan da Cunha), the Patagonian colony was, in terms of population size and distance, the most likely source for seals recorded at least along the Atlantic coast. Therefore, the hypothesis that the two male elephant seals here reported would belong to the Península Valdés breeding colony should be considered.

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